

## OLD BODIES LIKE CARTS

In a famous passage in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* the Buddha, feeling old and ill, says to his attendant Ānanda — according to the PTS edition<sup>1</sup>:

*Seyyathā pi Ānanda jara-sakaṭaṃ vegha-missakena yāpeti,  
evam eva kho Ānanda vegha-missakena maññe Tathāgatassa  
kāyo yāpeti.*

Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Davids translate<sup>2</sup>: ‘. . . and just as a worn-out cart, Ānanda, can be kept going only with the help of thongs, so, methinks, the body of the Tathāgata can only be kept going by bandaging it up.’

The identical passage occurs in the *Samyutta Nikāya*<sup>3</sup>. There the PTS editor, Feer, reads *vedha-missakena* both times.

The word *vegha-missakena* has already attracted attention in this *Journal*. In 1884 the Revd. Richard Morris devoted four pages<sup>4</sup> and much ingenuity to its explication.

Almost the same word occurs at *Thera-gāthā* 143. The PTS edition reads:

*Ye kho te veghamissena nānatthena ca kammunā  
manusse uparundhanti pharusupakkamā janā  
te pi tath’ eva kīranti, na hi kammaṃ panassati.*

K. R. Norman translates: ‘These people of harsh effort, who molest men with an action involving nooses and varying in aims, are treated in the same way, for their action does not perish.’ In his note on the verse<sup>5</sup>, he too discusses various readings and interpretations.

I need not here repeat full details of the variant readings and suggested interpretations; they can be read in or traced through the secondary sources cited above. *Vegha-* is variously read as *vekha-*, *veṭha-*, *vetha-*, *vedha-*, *vesa-*, *veḷu-*. The commentary on the *Dīgha Nikāya* must have read *vegha-*, because it glossed it as *veghana-*.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the commentary on the same passage in the *Samyutta Nikāya* in the PTS edition has *veṭhana-* for *veghana-*; if this is correct it

presumably glosses *veṭha-* in the text. The *Dīgha* sub-commentary<sup>7</sup> apparently read *vekha-*; there are many variants but neither *veṭha-* nor *veggha-* is among them. The commentary on the *Thera-gāthā*<sup>5</sup> glosses *vekha-*, but also reports the variant reading *vedha-*.

The conclusion seems to me inescapable: the tradition is utterly confused and at a loss what to read.

The commentarial tradition of interpretation, however, is unequivocal: the word *ve(X)a-* means 'strap, thong'. The *Dīgha* commentary gives this interpretation the first time the word occurs, because it seems to fit that context: one can hold together a tumbledown cart with straps. The *Thera-gāthā* commentary takes the same line: *vekha-missenā ti varatta-khaṇḍadinā*.

Since the commentators had no idea what text to read, their interpretation is *prima facie* suspect. All the other commentaries seem simply to have followed the interpretation of the *Dīgha* commentary; and most modern scholars have joined them.

Neither *veggha-* nor *vekha-* is attested elsewhere and no one has suggested a plausible etymology for either. Norman solves this difficulty by reading *veṭha-*. The much greater difficulty, however, is that meanings like 'strap' make very little sense in two of the three occurrences of the word. Though Morris claimed:<sup>4</sup> 'The body of an old man would need some protection from heat and cold, hence, the use of a *bandhana*', the idea that the Buddha was kept going by bandages will not stand scrutiny. Nor is 'an action involving nooses' a likely expression for general maleficence.

The other modern attempts to interpret *ve(X)a-* have failed to find plausible etymologies or meanings appropriate to all three occurrences.

There is a passage in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*<sup>8</sup> which is not a close enough parallel to provide a solution and yet may shed light on the Buddha's simile. It describes the process of dying, in this case the death of an enlightened man:

*Tad yathānaḥ susamāhitam utsarjaṃ yāyāt, evaṃ evāyaṃ*

*śārīra ātmā prājñenātmanānvārūḍha utsarjaṃ yāti, yatra itad ūrdhvocchvāsī bhavati.*

'So, as a heavily loaded cart may go along creaking, in the same way the embodied self, mounted (possessed) by the intelligent self, goes creaking, when he comes to breathe out for the last time.'

The heavy, stertorous breathing of the dying man is compared to the creaking of a loaded cart. Whether or not the Buddha knew this passage, it is a direct comparison between a cart which is proceeding with difficulty and the body of a dying man. One is therefore tempted to search for a similarly straightforward comparison in the Buddha's words.

I believe that this can be found by reading *vedha-*. There is support for *vedha-* in the manuscript traditions of all three texts: *Dīgha*, *Saṃyutta* and *Thera-gāthā*. The PED connects *vedhati* with *vyathati* and gives it the meanings 'tremble, quiver, quake, shake'. It also reports *avedha* meaning 'imperturbable' (Sn 322). Sanskrit *vyathā* in Monier-Williams has among its meanings 'agitation, perturbation . . . pain . . . loss, damage'. The cognate past participle *vyathita* has among its meanings 'tottering, rocking, reeling . . . distressed, afflicted'. Thus the semantic field of *vyath* stretches from involuntary shaking to pain and distress. The old cart would shake without feeling pain, the Buddha painfully. In the *Thera-gāthā* verse the shaking aspect is not relevant; that is only about giving pain.

The PED also supplies appropriate interpretations of *yāpeti* and *missa(ka)-*. *Yāpeti* does not have any passive sense as in the Rhys Davids' translation; it means 'keep going'. *Missa(ka)-* is a noun (as at *Vin* I 33) meaning 'a mixture of various'. So in the *Thera-gāthā* verse I do not take it as a *bahubbhi* agreeing with *kammunā*, but as a *tappurisa*.

I therefore propose that in all passages we read *vedha-*, and that the noun *vedha-* (presumably masculine) is related to *vyathā* and has the same range of meaning. In the Buddha's simile I translate 'keeps going with various quakings'. The elder's verse I translate 'molest men with a variety of damage'.

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## Notes

1 D II 100

2 *Dialogues of the Buddha*, II, 107.

3 S V 153.

4 *JPTS* 1884, 97–101.

5 *Elders' Verses* I, 154.

6 Sv. II 548.

7 *Dīgha-nikāya-atthakathā-ṭīkā* II 188.

8 IV, 3, 35. I follow the text and interpretation of Senart.

## NĀMARŪPASAMĀSO\*

According to Malalasekera<sup>1</sup>, this text may be assigned to the 10th century and ascribed to a therā, Khema, of Ceylon. Although it was once held in high esteem, it subsequently became better appreciated in Burma where it formed one of the nine *Let-Than* (*Lakkhaṇaganthā*) or 'little finger manuals' of Abhidhamma. A *ṭīkā* was composed in the 12th century by another Sinhalese therā, Vācissara.

In Burma the text is known as the *Khemappakaraṇa* (which would seem to corroborate its authorship) but is also occasionally referred to as the *Paramatthadīpa*.

An original Sinhala MS was discovered in Ambarukkhārāma, Welitara, 'teeming with discrepancies'.<sup>2</sup> With the aid of the *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* and its Commentary, the *Aṭṭhasālinī*, however, it was revised by Baṭapola Dhammapāla, a pupil of C. A. Sīlakkhandha Mahāthera. Both the text and a Sinhala commentary, the *Silipīṭapata*, were subsequently published.<sup>3</sup> In the English Preface Dhammapāla assumed the original author to be Anuruddha (who composed the better known exegetical manual, *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, in the 12th century). If it were not Anuruddha himself then the style of language clearly pointed to a contemporary.

In the early 1900s, A. P. Buddhadatta discovered the MSS, in Burmese script, of both the original text and its *ṭīkā* in the Bernard Free Library, Rangoon. He copied both MSS and these were subsequently utilised by P. Dhammārāma (a pupil of Ariyavaṃsa Mahāthera of Galle, Sri Lanka) in his edition in Roman script.<sup>4</sup> In a Pali introduction, *Nāmarūpa-samāsa-Viññatti*, Dhammārāma acknowledged the authorship of Khema.

For this translation that follows, the first in a Western language, I have taken as my source mainly the Sinhala edition mentioned above.<sup>5</sup>

Let the late Malalasekera have the final word in this introduction: 'The short disquisitions on the various subjects are concisely written in simple, easy style and the whole work